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ABSTRACT

Limitations of interpretations of revisionist historians concerning educational development in the 1930s and 1940s are examined. Revisionists have made uninformed assumptions about educational practice and have ignored significant aspects of educational development. Often their conclusions are too limited in scope. For example, they tend to view the progressive education movement as the major expression of liberal educational thought. However, these historians have neglected state and local curriculum programs. Two other conclusions seem to be lacking in evidence drawn from educational practice. One is the contention that educators have largely ignored the roles of community agencies other than the schools in the educational process. The second is that schools are oppressive institutions which regiment, indoctrinate, and sort children. This conclusion excludes an examination of classroom aims, content, and methods, and consideration of directional changes. Actually, since educational practice is so diverse, generalizations about instruction are invalid. Revisionists have also neglected source materials concerning curriculum development during this era. It is suggested that these historians will present a more valid picture of progressive education if they give more attention to what really happened in the schools during the 1930s and 1940s and to the kind of change that leaders in the field were seeking. (Author/KC)

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THE REVISIONIST HISTORIANS AND EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Hollis L. Caswell

I shall make only one point. It arises primarily from my experience in working in state and city curriculum programs. It is my contention that revisionist historians have given far too little attention to educational practice in their interpretations of educational developments in the nineteen thirties and forties. They have made assumptions about practice that have little basis in fact, and they have ignored some highly significant aspects of educational development. Far too often they have simply assumed that theory reveals practice, that the ideas expounded by educational theorists accurately reflect practice in the field.

The consideration that revisionists give to educational practice is too limited in scope. For example, they have tended to view the organized progressive education movement as the major if not exclusive expression of liberal educational thought. Many seem to assume that to evaluate the liberal influence on curriculum development in the thirties and forties they need only consider the Eight Year Study and publications of the Progressive Education Association.

The fact is that the thirties witnessed a tremendous expansion of organized curriculum work, both through State Departments of Education and local school systems. During that decade alone I participated as general consultant in seven state-wide and five city curriculum programs, and in addition directed curriculum surveys in three other cities. Such work was underway in all parts of the nation. It was those programs that

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influenced educational practice most widely. They involved and influenced hundreds of schools and thousands of teachers.(1)

I believe that educators defined and tested liberal educational goals and methods far more extensively in that broad curriculum movement than they did through the activities of the Progressive Education Association. For example, I never was a member of the Progressive Education Association and yet I viewed myself as a liberal and was generally so considered. Thousands of teachers, supervisors, and administrators who studied with Kilpatrick, Bode and their like-minded colleagues incorporated changes in their practices designed to accomplish more liberal goals. The Great Depression aided this process for it created an intellectual climate in which questions previously unwelcome about our social and economic system could be raised. A natural outgrowth of this ferment and questioning was the broad movement in State Departments of Education and local school systems to improve the curriculum. It is my conviction that until educational historians study this pervasive and influential movement they cannot judge fairly how American schools responded to liberal thought during this highly significant period.

Two important conclusions arrived at by revisionist historians seem to me to be lacking in evidence drawn from educational practice. One is the contention that educators have largely ignored the part played in education by other agencies in the community than the school. No doubt there is some truth in this contention. However, my experience in curriculum programs during the thirties and forties leads me to believe that in practice there was much more concern with the community as a

whole than the revisionists have recognized.

For example, the appointment by the TVA in Norris, Tenn. of a Superintendent of Education rather than a Superintendent of Schools was not a happenstance action. It reflected a belief that education should be viewed as a community wide undertaking which involved several agencies. In turn, this action reflected a concern that many educators and community leaders throughout the nation had for broadening the concept of education to include the influence of other community agencies than the school. Study of the publications of the Society for Curriculum Study, the national association which reflected the broad curriculum movement to which I have referred, will reveal that substantial emphasis was given to this broad community view.

The second basic conclusion advanced by radical revisionists is unusually well presented by Diane Ravitch. She states: ".....radical writers have charged that American educational institutions have not played the democratic, benevolent role that educators have traditionally claimed for them. On the contrary, assert these critics, the schools are themselves oppressive institutions which regiment, indoctrinate, and sort children, either brutally or subtly ..... processing them to take their place in an unjust social order."[2] This conclusion is based on an appraisal of practice in American schools. Consequently, the question must be raised as to the soundness of their appraisal.

An adequate treatment of practice requires that it be considered from two points of view. First, there is the question of what aims, content, and methods are actually used in classrooms and what outcomes are realized. Second, there is the question of what direction is being taken by changes that are being sought and encouraged by leadership. Herein lies the best available forcast for the future.

The radical revisionists have acknowledged the difficulty of making a sound judgment about actual classroom practice with the data that are available. Nevertheless, they cite a few studies as being adequate support for their conclusion.(3) Pierce's study of the civic training of youth(4) and Gellerman's study of the influence of the American Legion(5) are illustrative.

I feel that the evidence from these studies is totally inadequate support for the sweeping conclusion they reach. These studies are largely concerned with what various organizations tried to get the schools to do. There is no convincing evidence of the extent of their influence on actual practice.

It has been my observation that practice in American schools is widely diverse. It differs markedly from classroom to classroom, school to school, and system to system. In surveys where direct observation could be made by trained personnel I found it most difficult to reach supportable generalizations about instruction in a single school system. Having had this experience I can but conclude when viewing the nation as a whole that the radical revisionists simply assert as fact what their theoretical position indicates should be the case.

The direction of change in the curriculum that field leaders sought in the thirties presents a very different situation. There is an abundance of source material to draw on. Curriculum bulletins of many types, illustrative teaching units, accounts of curriculum programs and the like were published by a large number of city and state school systems.(6) In so far as I have been able to discover the revisionists have completely ignored this material. Study of such material would reveal reasons to question the conclusion the radical revisionists have drawn. I shall give one illustration.

The State of Virginia had one of the most widely discussed currrculum programs in the thirties. The aims of education that should be accepted to guide the curriculum were widely discussed. Laymen as well as educators participated in formulation of the statement. One section dealt with broad understandings and supporting generalizations that should be developed by the students. I quote one:

THE UNDERSTANDING THAT THE MASSES OF MEN STRUGGLE CONSTANTLY TO GAIN FREEDOM FROM THE DOMINATION BY THE FEW.

Supporting Generalizations

1. Individuals and powerful minorities have always sought to control and subjugate the masses.
2. Many of the significant movements of history have been caused by man's effort to throw off the yoke of oppression and slavery.
3. Human rights do not come inevitably and as a gift.
4. Democracy is an experiment in the effort to establish human rights and freedom for all men.
5. Almost everywhere gains in establishing human rights have been made only after much suffering or the sacrifices of war.
6. The present social order is not fixed and permanent. Man continues to modify it in his search for justice and freedom. (7)

I submit that this does not indicate an effort to develop and strengthen a curriculum designed to oppress the masses by making them docile servants of an all-powerful elite.

This then is my one suggestion to revisionist historians. If you would honestly better understand American education in the nineteen thirties and forties give more attention to what really happened in our schools and to the kind of change that leadership in the field was seeking.

Notes

1. See Hollis L. Caswell and Associates, Curriculum Improvement in Public School Systems (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1950)

2. Diane Ravitch, The Revisionists Revised (New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1977), p.3.

3. Clarence J. Karier, Paul Violas, Joel Spring, Roots of Crisis (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1973) pp.161-162.

4. Bessie Louise Pierce, Citizens Organizations and the Civic Training of Youth, Part III, Report of the Commission on the Social Studies, American Historical Association (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1933)

5. William Gellerman, The American Legion as Educator (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1938)

6. For example, see Henry Harap, A Survey of Courses of Study Published in the Last Two Years, (Western Reserve University, Curriculum Laboratory, No. 44, Cleveland Ohio, May 20, 1935)

7. Tentative Course of Study for Virginia Elementary Schools (State Board of Education, Richmond, Virginia, 1935)